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- * Estonia To Extradite Suspects to US *-
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->From the Editor's Keyboard           "Saying it like it is!"
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It's been a very long week here, with little time to consider topics for discussion. It seems like this has been the case for many weeks, I'm afraid. But, I'm guessing you're not reading our issues for any of my brilliant exchanges and commentary, so I won't fret!

Until next time...

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - New Video Game Consoles Face Changed Landscap  
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    "***** Sony PlayStation 4 in Stores Today!  
The Legend of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds!  
And much more!
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New Video Game Consoles Face Changed Landscape

The last time Sony and Microsoft came out with new video game consoles, there was no iPad, the iPhone was months away and "FarmVille" and "Angry Birds" had yet to be conjured up.

The PlayStation 4, which launches Friday, and the Xbox One, which goes on sale next week, face a much-changed gaming and entertainment landscape than their predecessors. As Sony and Microsoft spar this holiday season over who has the brawnier machine and more enticing online features, hardcore gamers are all but certain to fall for the shiny, powerful new consoles. But what's less clear is how the gadgets will compete for the

attention of people who now look to their tablets, smartphones and other devices for entertainment.

"It's turning out that these consoles, in fighting each other for the love of the hardcore gamer, run the risk of failing to capture people in their homes," says James McQuivey, an analyst with Forrester Research.

Both Microsoft and Sony position their gaming systems as entertainment devices meant to take over the living room. The Xbox 360 started streaming movies from Netflix in 2008 and the PlayStation 3, which already served as a Blu-ray player, soon followed, along with a bevy of other entertainment options. Experts wondered whether gaming systems would soon replace cable set-top boxes.

Not so fast, was the reply from a host of other gadget makers. Along came Google's Chromecast, the Roku player, Apple TV and, of course, a slew of tablets. There are many ways to stream movies, TV and music into the home now. In that sense, the Xbox One and the PlayStation 4 are no longer in a traditional, head-to-head battle.

"It's really these consoles against everything else," says Scott Stein, senior editor for the tech blog CNET.

That said, both gaming systems are expected to be in brisk demand around the holidays. Sony expects to sell 5 million units of the PlayStation 4 by the end of its fiscal year in March. The PlayStation 3, in comparison, sold 3.5 million units in that time period seven years ago. Microsoft declined to offer a sales outlook for the Xbox One through the holidays, but demand should be comparable, says Wedbush analyst Michael Pachter. He expects 3 million Xbox Ones to be sold through December and 4.5 million through March.

Why does the PlayStation get a slight edge? Price could be one reason. The Xbox One, which includes an updated Kinect motion sensor, will cost \$500, which is \$100 more than the PlayStation 4. In contrast, the PlayStation 3 went on sale at \$500 or \$600 depending on the model in November 2006 while the Xbox 360 cost \$400. Most new game software will cost \$60.

Dan Perkins, a gamer who's on the fence about which console to buy, says the "price is certainly a factor" nudging him toward a PS4 purchase even though he was previously an Xbox man.

"I bought the Xbox 360 primarily because I preferred the titles it offered to the PS3. A major contributor to this decision was the 'Mass Effect' trilogy, which was initially unavailable on the PS3 at the time of my purchase," says Perkins, 40, a librarian from Syracuse, N.Y. "Neither platform has the edge on games in my opinion," he says. "In the end though, a big factor will be which system my friends adopt."

The friend factor is why Pedro Amador-Gates decided to stick with the Xbox. The 37-year-old first-time father says he did consider switching, but the PlayStation didn't have a chance. He likes his interface, his username is already set up and his gaming achievements will carry over to the new machine.

"Ninety percent is because I am already established in the Xbox community," he says.

Then again, neither the Xbox One nor the PlayStation 4 is backward

compatible, meaning the machines don't play games that were made for their predecessors. That gives players a clean slate to start with a whole new set of games.

"Everyone is starting over to some extent," Stein says.

The console makers' challenge will be to ensure that everyone does start over, instead of sticking with their own game console or perhaps buying an iPad instead of a new game machine. Tony Bartel, the president of the world's largest videogame retailer, GameStop, expects the new consoles will be in "high demand and short supply" due to a huge pent-up demand for new gaming. After all, people have been playing the same consoles since before the iPhone came out.

"There's tremendous demand for innovation," Bartel says.

Given the choice between an iPad and a PlayStation 4, Sony believes its consoles have an advantage during the holiday shopping season.

"One purchase offers something that everyone in the family can enjoy together," says Andrew House, president and CEO of Sony Computer Entertainment. "Whereas the other is a single-person experience."

Sony PlayStation 4 in Stores Today

It's been seven years since Sony released its last video game console, but the PlayStation 4 is finally available today, starting at \$399. The new console may be too big to be a literal stocking stuffer, but it's guaranteed that it will be one of the most requested gifts this holiday season.

Since the PlayStation 4 was first announced in February, video gamers have been eagerly anticipating the system. The improved controller design and the ability to play games as they're downloaded are among some of the many features that show Sony's focus on games.

The company had a trick up its sleeve, even in the hour just before the console launched. Game developer studio Naughty Dog announced a new entry in the Uncharted series, one of the PlayStation 3's most popular line of games.

The Xbox One, Microsoft's soon-to-be released video game system, has a high hurdle to overcome. While it has reversed several policies that alienated many gamers, such as daily Internet connection check-ins and used game restrictions, many gamers have claimed that the Xbox One still does not meet their needs. The company's focus on integrating cable TV and Skype into the new Xbox paints it more like a multimedia center than a traditional video game console.

But that doesn't seem to be stopping people from ordering either system. Amazon has been reported as saying that the combined number of pre-orders for both the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One "are the largest product releases in Amazon history."

To say video gamers have been eagerly awaiting Sony's Playstation 4 would be an understatement. The PS4 hits stores this Friday for \$399, while Microsoft's Xbox One, another new video game system, will be available next week for \$499. With Microsoft hot on Sony's heels, both gamers and nongamers alike will be asking one burning question: which gaming system should I buy? It's a bit too early to call until we can compare the two side-by-side, but for now we've got you covered with our first impressions of Sony's sleek entry.

The PS4 looks like something that might come out of an Apple design lab, though completely in black instead of white. The power and eject buttons are incorporated directly along the front of the console's sloped edges, with the CD drive and USB ports hidden between the two buttons. For Playstation users that like keeping their console upright, Sony sells a separate stand that stabilizes the PS4 for \$14.99.

The Playstation 4's new controller, the Dualshock 4, isn't as minimalist as the console, but comes with a several ergonomic improvements that make it more comfortable than Sony's Playstation 3 controllers. The trigger buttons are slightly indented to conform to players' index fingers, while the dual analog sticks have a slightly elevated rim that keeps players' thumbs from slipping off. The controller isn't heavy, but still feels solid.

Aside from more comfort, the Dualshock 4 controller has plenty of bells and whistles. The controller's embedded speaker comes in surprisingly loud and clear (if a little tinny). The touchpad that dominates much of the space between the directional pad and buttons is smooth to the touch and responsive as well.

Customers that also bought the \$59.99 Playstation Camera can point their controller's light bar at the camera. The camera then tracks the position of the brightly colored light bar. In addition to position tracking, the controller has motion tracking, detecting the orientation of the controller as it's tilted left and right and rocked back and forth.

We did experience some hardware problems with our first review unit, such as freezing while in game and refusing to boot up from the system's standby mode. These issues have made playing with the video game system less a labor of love, and more like a labor. However, that hasn't stopped us from digging into the system's interface and games. We will be receiving another unit soon to see if these hardware problems persist and will update this article at that time.

Navigating the PS4's clean menus is easy. After creating a system account, Playstation users are taken to a personalized home screen that includes recent games they have played, as well as the game activity of other Playstation users that they have befriended. A Sony representative said that customers can download software updates and downloadable content for their games straight from the home screen, instead of having to navigate through several menus. However, no online features were thoroughly tested at the time of this review.

Customers will need to download a software update to use any of those online features, including any activity synced to their Playstation Network accounts. However, Sony has planned to simplify the downloading of software updates and game patches by allowing them to download while the player is away. The console can be placed in standby mode, or it can

be customized to turn on in the middle of the night, for the purpose of downloading and installing software updates.

In addition to the console's menu is the Playstation App, now available for iOS and Android devices. According to Sony, the Playstation app can be used to purchase and download games for the PS4 while on the go. So if you've been eager to play a game available through PSN, you could make the purchase on your lunch break and possibly have the game ready to go by the time you get back from work.

The PS4's processing power is about ten times greater than that of the PS3's, but how does that ultimately affect how games look and play? Games like Knack, a family-friendly action game, and Killzone Shadow Fall, a first person shooter, run beautifully. Though screenshots of those games show off the amount of detail went into the games' animations, it doesn't show off just how smoothly it runs.

The games also take advantage of the improved motion detectors of the controllers, as well as the touchpad and light bar. Certain weapons and gadgets in Killzone can be activated with a swipe of the touchpad. However, it can be a little awkward to swipe the touchpad while simultaneously gripping the controller by its handles.

Games are automatically installed to the PS4's 500 GB hard drive when inserted into the disc drive. The installations only need a couple of minutes before they're ready to run. However, with many games requiring over 30 GB of memory, the PS4's hard drive could be completely filled quickly. Playstation users may have to keep an eye on how much hard drive space they have, though thankfully deleting games and reinstalling them is easy and quick.

The Playstation 4 is a solid video gaming system, even without any comparison to the Xbox One. There's no one feature that could be called the Playstation 4 selling point, but instead, it's several smaller upgrades, like better graphics and improved controllers, that together create a gaming experience greater than the sum of its individual parts.

But that's not to say that Sony's console will end up being the number one gaming stocking stuffer this year. We'll have to wait and see what Microsoft's Xbox One fires back with at the Nov. 22 release

'Towerfall,' Ouya's Best Game, Is Coming to The PlayStation 4

The Android-based Ouya console doesn't have many great games, but there is at least one standout: Towerfall, a Smash Bros.-style four-player combat game with an emphasis on archery. Now that game is coming to the PlayStation 4. Next year Towerfall's six-month exclusivity with Ouya will expire, and while we knew the game would be making its way to the PC, developer Matt Thorson has revealed that it will be hitting the PS4 at the same time as well. Along with the new platform comes a new subtitle, as the next version of the game will be known as Towerfall: Ascension.

"There's so much new stuff."

"It's not just a straight-up port," Thorson tells Polygon. "There's so much new stuff." Among the changes are new weapons, characters, and levels, as well as a brand new quest mode that can be played by one or

two players. For those who bought the game on Ouya the game sold just 5,000 copies on the platform all of the new content will be available as a free update three months after Ascension launches. The announcement is just the latest in Sony's continued push to court a huge library of indie games for its PlayStation devices. You can expect to see Towerfall: Ascension on PC and PS4 in early 2014.

The Legend of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds

The top-down Zelda games started as console releases on the NES and SNES, but as 3D graphics took precedence, the flatter rendition of Hyrule was relegated to the portable platforms. Some have been better than others (here's to you, Minish Cap), but virtually every portable entry to the series has stayed rooted to the open-world exploration of the original game. It might not be the best game in the series, but A Link Between Worlds for the Nintendo 3DS and other portable consoles is the most open, fluid and distinctive title since Wind Waker.

Let's start with the obvious additions that set A Link Between Worlds apart from its predecessors. The classic means of item collection have been almost entirely scrapped. In their place is a store from which Link can rent (or buy) nearly every necessary piece of equipment less than an hour into the game.

In A Link Between Worlds, the entire world of Hyrule is yours to explore, equipped with whichever items you can afford. By the time Link reaches the Lorule, the decimated anti-Hyrule and counterpart to A Link to the Past's Dark World, every dungeon can be explored in any order you choose. Here's the catch: if you die, you lose all of your rented items. It'll cost you to reacquire what you lost, but the economy in both Hyrule and Lorule is thankfully very forgiving.

The way items work has been revamped as well. In every Zelda title I can remember, Link has had a limited stock of certain items, such as bombs or arrows. Every item in A Link Between Worlds uses up a rechargeable energy bar instead, which means no more hunting for bomb-filled, breakable pottery to progress.

The other major addition is Link's newest ability: turning into a drawing that can sidle along walls and cliffs. By pasting himself to the wall, Link can access areas that would be inaccessible otherwise, although in a combat-heavy game like this, it would have been nice to see graffiti-Link given a bit more of an offensive presence. The ability is not only unquestionably more than just a gimmick, it also allows us to see the Hyrule from A Link to the Past in a completely different light. Getting up close and personal with a map that many of us have memorized from decades ago is great fan service and adds a dimension to the experience that keeps it from becoming stale in spite of familiarity.

What surprised me most about the game was just how snappy it felt. Link moves at a quick pace through the map, but his speed is matched by the enemies populating Hyrule and Lorule. Don't get me wrong, the game contains a lengthy, worthwhile adventure, but by the time you've locked into the controls and have a grasp of both maps, the pace picks up rapidly. The game's version of fast travel, represented by bird statues that also serve as save points, is also a welcome improvement. Despite the relatively small size of the world, the maze-like structure of

Lorule specifically can make traversing the same regions multiple times a challenge.

Regarding challenge, A Link Between Worlds is not a particularly easy game. At the risk of readers mocking my abilities, I have to admit that I found myself dying fairly often in some of the more difficult dungeons. But considering how much hand-holding makes its way into most Nintendo games, every swarm of enemies that cornered me in a dark room, every time I found myself stumped in the face of a new puzzle, entirely lost in search of what to do, it was a welcome breath of fresh air.

As I swam aimlessly above one submerged, but open, door, pondering which missing item would allow me to dive, I couldn't help but be thankful that I didn't have to read another screen of monotonous dialogue explaining each and every nook and cranny of the game's world. I admit, I did have to resort to the carefully placed hint ghosts more than once, but it never took away from my enjoyment of A Link Between Worlds.

And that's what this game is all about. There is just so much to see and do in the lands of Hyrule and the dark, mirroring Lorule, much of which I am sure I missed along the way. If you manage to open every chest and purchase every item, beat all the mini-games and collect enough rupees to buy Hyrule Castle, there's still a Hero Mode to unlock with even stronger enemies to vanquish. The only significant complaint I could come up with while I was writing this review is that I only wish more of Nintendo's games would adopt the same philosophy of providing us with a world to explore without explaining it every step of the way.

If you have a 3DS, 3DS XL or 2DS, and you're looking for a game this holiday season, A Link Between Worlds will reward your investment with a volume of content and smart new gameplay dynamics that give the series the fresh coat of paint it needed.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Google Warns of 'Splinter Net' Fallout From U.S. Spying

Search giant Google Inc. on Wednesday warned that U.S. spying operations risk fracturing the open Internet into a "splinter net" that could hurt American business.

In the first public testimony before Congress by a major technology company since former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden disclosed top secret surveillance programs, Google said it should be allowed to provide the public more information about government demands for user data.

"The current lack of transparency about the nature of government surveillance in democratic countries undermines the freedom and the trust

most citizens cherish, it also has a negative impact on our economic growth and security and on the promise of an Internet as a platform for openness and free expression," Richard Salgado, Google's law enforcement and information security director, said.

Members of Congress are grappling with what changes to make to U.S. surveillance programs and laws after the Snowden leaks, which were published in June. The Senate Judiciary subcommittee hearing was on legislation proposed by Democratic Senator Al Franken of Minnesota that would provide more transparency.

Franken said the "Surveillance Transparency Act of 2013" would require NSA to disclose publicly how many people have their data collected and estimate how many were Americans.

It would also allow internet and phone companies to inform the public about the orders for data collection from the government and the number of users whose information has been produced in response to those orders.

"Right now, as a result of those gags, many people think that American internet companies are giving up far more information to the government than they likely are," Franken said.

Robert Litt, general counsel for the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, said requiring NSA to compile those statistics would be an intensive task that would take resources away from the mission of uncovering terrorism plots.

"I think those thousand mathematicians have other things that they can be doing in protecting the nation ... rather than trying to go through and count U.S. persons," Litt said.

"If you impose upon them some sort of obligation to identify U.S. persons, they're going to take an email address that may be, you know, Joe at hotmail.com. And they're going to have to dig down and say, 'what else can we find out about Joe at hotmail.com?'" he said. "And that's going to require learning more about that person than NSA otherwise would learn."

Google officials have expressed outrage and called for reform after a Washington Post report late last month said that the NSA had tapped directly into communications links used by Google and Yahoo Inc to move huge amounts of email and other user information among overseas data centers.

Salgado said the leaks about NSA operations have led to "a real concern" inside and outside the United States about the role of government and the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court, which decides in secret on legal issues about electronic surveillance efforts.

The fallout could result in greater internet restrictions that could hurt U.S. economic interests and some proposals could in effect create a "splinter net" by putting up internet barriers, he said.

While he did not mention any specific proposal, a government plan in Brazil would force global internet companies to store data on Brazilian users inside that country.

"You can certainly look at the reaction, both inside the United States and outside of the United States to these disclosures, to see the

potential of the closing of the markets through data location requirements" and similar restrictions, Salgado told Reuters after the hearing.

"That's bad for all of the American companies, and frankly bad for the Internet generally," he said. "This is a very real business issue, but it is also a very real issue for the people who are considering using the cloud and for those who currently use the cloud and may have their trust in it rocked by the disclosures," Salgado told Reuters.

President Barack Obama's administration has defended the NSA programs and the secrecy around them as necessary in fighting terrorism and groups such as al Qaeda.

Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Patrick Leahy, a Vermont Democrat who has proposed legislation for restrictions on NSA programs, said reforms were necessary, "especially when NSA handled things so carelessly they let a 29-year-old subcontractor walk off with all their secrets and, so far as I know, nobody has been even reprimanded for that."

Salgado, in his testimony, quoted reports that U.S. companies may lose billions of dollars in revenue as non-American users of the Internet grow wary of services based in the United States.

Microsoft Admits Its Data Centers Are Vulnerable to NSA Spying

Although Google has said that it s deployed end-to-end encryption between its data centers to keep out the prying eyes of the National Security Agency, it doesn t seem as though Microsoft has done any such thing just yet. Wired reports that Microsoft executive Dorothee Belz said this week that Microsoft s server-to-server transportation is generally not encrypted, which is why the company is currently reviewing our security system. This is a concern because documents leaked by Edward Snowden recently showed how the NSA was able to hack into Google and Yahoo s data centers to breaking into their main communications links between their private clouds and the public Internet. If Microsoft hasn t yet implemented the server-to-server encryption that Google has implemented, this means its private data servers are wide open to NSA hacking.

Spy Scandal Weighs on U.S. Tech Firms in China, Cisco Takes Hit

U.S. technology companies including Cisco Systems Inc, International Business Machines Corp and Microsoft Corp may face new challenges selling their goods and services in China as fallout from the U.S. spying scandal starts to take a toll.

Cisco shares tumbled 11 percent on Thursday, a day after it warned that revenue would drop 10 percent this quarter, and continue to contract through the middle of next year, in part due to a backlash in China against revelations about U.S. government surveillance programs.

"All the big U.S. IT companies are concerned," said Jim Lewis, a senior fellow with the Center for Strategic Studies in Washington, who is an expert on China and technology. "But so far Cisco is bearing the brunt of

it."

Lewis said Beijing may be targeting Cisco in particular as retaliation for Washington's refusal to buy goods from China's Huawei Technologies Co, a telecommunications equipment maker that the United States claims is a threat to its national security because of links to the Chinese military.

The Snowden revelations provoked a storm in the Chinese media and added urgency to Beijing's efforts to use its market power to create indigenous software and hardware, analysts and businessmen say.

"The U.S. government isn't doing any favors for Cisco," said Evercore Partners analyst Mark McKechnie.

Cisco Chief Executive John Chambers said on a conference call that Cisco and its peers face "challenging political dynamics" in China.

IBM last month reported a 22 percent drop in China revenue, leading to a 4 percent decline in its third-quarter profit. Chief Financial Officer Mark Loughridge attributed the company's problems to the "process surrounding China's development of a broad-based economic reform plan," which caused delays in purchases.

Microsoft executives singled out China as the company's weakest performing area in the world during the September quarter in an October 24 earnings call.

"The macro conditions in China, which I think are consistent with what some of the other companies have reported as well, have been challenging," said Chris Suh, Microsoft's general manager for investor relations.

Company officials could not be reached for comment.

Beijing has long mistrusted foreign technology companies, and those concerns have been exacerbated since former U.S. National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden first revealed the existence of the NSA's clandestine data mining program in June.

"This is all about China using its own technology, and China building leading technology companies," said James McGregor, chairman for Greater China at consultancy APCO Worldwide.

Although Beijing has not prohibited state firms from purchasing Western-made technology services and equipment, the government has sent a clear message to choose Chinese-made equipment first, China-based executives say.

"While a formal document hasn't been issued, in the future we will try to buy IT equipment from domestic brands, such as Lenovo," said a person familiar with technology purchases at one of China's four big state-owned banks.

"The government's signal is pretty clear - they want to rely less on U.S. products, such as IOE (IBM, Oracle and EMC Corp)," said a former China-based telecommunications executive.

Oracle officials could not be reached. Representatives with EMC and IBM declined to comment.

In August, the National Development and Reform Commission, China's top economic planning body, published a statement setting cyber-security standards for financial institutions, cloud computing and big data, information system secrecy management and industrial controls.

Four domestic software and hardware makers, including China National Software & Service Co, announced this month they have received a "top-tier" rating from the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology.

China National Software's share price has gained nearly 250 percent since the Snowden revelations.

"We hope and demand that relevant foreign companies respect China's laws," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Qin Gang said on Thursday, when asked about Cisco's woes. "At the same time, as the Chinese government we of course have an obligation, a responsibility, to protect the country's security."

Snowden's revelations have reverberated in other big emerging markets such as Brazil, Mexico and India.

Cisco CFO Frank Calderoni said China was where the company was most affected by a political backlash, but noted that it was difficult to quantify how much of its revenue shortfall was due to politics versus macroeconomic trends.

To be sure, the impact of any Snowden scandal backlash is unlikely to hit all U.S. tech firms equally.

Cisco is perhaps most vulnerable, experts said, because it competes with two well-established Chinese telecommunications equipment providers: Huawei and ZTE.

Chinese companies are less competitive in producing semiconductors and database software, which means that any fallout from the scandal will have less impact on U.S. firms in those areas.

"Everyone is feeling the heat from the NSA revelations," said a former employee at a major multinational technology firm. The important point, however, was that companies like IBM don't have competitors for their high-end equipment, the expert added. "If they don't buy from IBM they can't buy from anyone else."

Chicago Hacker Tied to Anonymous Given 10 Years in Prison

A Chicago computer hacker tied to the group known as Anonymous was sentenced on Friday to 10 years in prison for cyber attacks on various government agencies and businesses, including a global intelligence company.

Jeremy Hammond, 28, was handed the maximum term in the December 2011 hacking of Strategic Forecasting Inc, an attack his lawyers contend was driven by concern about the role of private firms in gathering intelligence domestically and abroad.

Prosecutors say the hack of Austin, Texas-based Strategic Forecasting, or Stratfor, resulted in the theft of 60,000 credit card numbers and records for 860,000 clients, which were then uploaded online. Hammond admitted being behind it in May.

He also admitted to hacking several law enforcement agencies and organizations, including the Arizona Department of Public Safety, releasing personal details of officers as part of an attack by the Anonymous-affiliated group LulzSec.

Hammond's lawyers argued their client should be sentenced to only time he had already served since his March 2012 arrest, portraying him as a political activist and whistleblower.

As part of the Stratfor attack, Hammond's lawyers said he turned over company e-mails to the anti-secrecy group WikiLeaks, which has since selectively released documents revealing the firm's dealings with clients including Goldman Sachs Group Inc and Coca-Cola Company.

Chief Judge Loretta Preska of the U.S. District Court in Manhattan imposed the 10-year term, and also ordered Hammond to serve three years of supervised release.

The defendant had pleaded guilty to a single charge of conspiracy to engage in computer hacking.

Hammond's sentencing drew more than 250 letters of support from family, friends and activists, including Daniel Ellsberg, the former U.S. military analyst who in 1971 released the Pentagon Papers, the top secret U.S. report on its role in the Vietnam War.

Estonia To Extradite Three Cybercrime Suspects to US

Estonia says it will extradite to the United States three men accused of hijacking millions of computers in a cyber-fraud scheme.

Justice Minister Hanno Pevkur said Thursday that his government has approved the extradition of Timur Gerassimenko, Dmitri Jegorov and Konstantin Poltev.

They are among seven people — six Estonians and one Russian — charged with infecting with malware more than 4 million computers in more than 100 countries, including some belonging to NASA and other U.S. government agencies.

U.S. prosecutors say the malware secretly enabled the defendants to generate millions of dollars by re-routing infected computers to certain websites and advertisements.

One of the defendants, Anton Ivanov, was extradited to the U.S. last year. The others are in jail in Estonia.

Microsoft's New Cybercrime Center Combines Tactics Against Hacking Groups

The maker of the most popular computer operating system in the world is launching a new strategy against criminal hackers by bringing together security engineers, digital forensics experts and lawyers trained in fighting software pirates under one roof at its new Cybercrime Center.

Microsoft Corp's expanded Digital Crimes Unit inside the 16,800-square foot, high-security facility combines a wide array of tactics that have worked the best: massive data gathering and analysis, gumshoe detective work, high-level diplomacy and creative lawyering.

The new approach, to be launched on Thursday, is the latest attempt to close the gap created in the past decade as criminal hackers innovated in technology and business methods to stay ahead of adversaries mired in the slow-moving world of international law enforcement.

Already, many of the biggest victories against organized online criminals have come when private companies have worked together to seize control of the networks of hacked computers, called botnets, that carry out criminal operations. Though it is at times derided for the security shortfalls in its own products, Microsoft has led more of those seizures than any other company.

"Cybercrime is getting worse," Digital Crimes Unit chief David Finn told Reuters during an exclusive visit to the Redmond, Washington, campus building this week. But Finn hopes that by mixing specialists from various professional arenas, Microsoft can get better.

The center features a lab for dissecting malicious software samples that is accessible only with fingerprint authorization. In another room, a monitor tracks the countries and Internet service providers with the greatest number of machines belonging to some of the worst botnets.

Next to a situation room with a wall-sized, touch-screen monitor sit rows of empty offices for visiting police, Microsoft customers or other allies expected to join specific missions for days or weeks at a time.

There are hundreds or thousands of botnets, and Microsoft is trying to get only the biggest or most damaging, or else to pursue fights that would establish key precedents.

In the past few years "at least half of the major, significant takedowns have been driven by Microsoft," said Steve Santorelli, a former Microsoft investigator and Scotland Yard cybercrime detective who now works at a security nonprofit group called Team Cymru.

Microsoft has tangled with a Mexican mafia family that proudly put brand labels on pirated Xbox game CDs, a ring that took online payments via a parking garage in Malaga, Spain, and a Russian virus writer paid with a paper bag full of cash - by a 12-year-old boy on a bike.

Outside security experts praised the cross-pollination of fraud, security and software specialists.

"That kind of integration is only for the better. The financial sector has been thinking along those lines as well," said Greg Garcia, a former cybersecurity official at the Department of Homeland Security and at Bank of America who now advises the banking industry's main cybersecurity coordination group, known as FS-ISAC.

The crimes unit doesn't tackle government spying, where Microsoft is

among the major Internet companies that have turned over large amounts of data on users to the U.S. National Security Agency (it is suing for the right to disclose how much). And another unit within Microsoft is in charge of making the company's products less susceptible to hacking.

About 80 of the crime unit's 100 staffers have focused on the piracy of Microsoft products, with far fewer devoted to deconstructing the methods of criminals attacking Microsoft users and stopping them when possible.

But time and again, the piracy squad has found counterfeiters who were using botnets that also sent spam or attacked websites with denial-of-service attacks, or who slipped malicious software into copied Microsoft wares, or who had other ties to broader security issues.

In one test, undercover Microsoft employees bought 20 new computers in China the way average consumers would. All had pirated versions of Windows, and all had at least traces of malicious software. An expanded pool of 169 machines included 18 percent ready to receive electronic commands as part of a botnet called Nitol.

More critically, the piracy people bring experience with unusually powerful U.S. copyright laws. With a strong preliminary showing in court that their goods are being misrepresented, copyright owners can win orders allowing them to seize the offending property without prior notice.

In an innovative and aggressive twist, Microsoft has been using that law to seize website addresses, including those used by criminals to control botnets.

"Microsoft really has done a very positive job in a couple of areas, and one of those is construction of legal frameworks that create precedents that allow future actions," said Jeff Williams, head of security strategy at Dell Inc's SecureWorks Counter Threat Unit.

The Nitol case was remarkable in that it and other botnets were connecting to 70,000 addresses at a Chinese web domain-name seller called 3322.org. Microsoft won the right to filter all connections to those addresses and blocked more than 7 million attempts in 16 days. The owner of 3322 agreed to settle Microsoft's lawsuit and to drop other bad addresses identified by Microsoft or Chinese Internet security officials in the future.

Microsoft also felled a botnet called Rustock, once one of the biggest sources of spam on the planet. More recently, it teamed with banks to seriously hurt two operations that sell do-it-yourself kits for crafting smaller botnets that have stolen hundreds of millions of dollars from online accounts.

The takedowns are often dramatic, with armed raids on multiple locations where servers are housed. If there are many control computers and they don't get disconnected within minutes of one another, the surviving machines can issue new commands and recreate the entire network.

During one raid in Pennsylvania, an executive at the bad web page's hosting company was cooperating when the site's owner realized what was happening and changed his password from afar, locking out the official. The Microsoft team pulled out the cables to save the day.

Finn and Microsoft crime expert Richard Boscovich, a fellow former federal

prosecutor, said they are working on new means to take down even more sophisticated botnets, which are controlled through a peer-to-peer mechanism instead of through centralized servers.

"You'll be seeing some interesting stuff in the near future," Boscovich promised. "This is an area where what is good for the business is good for society."

Italy Investigates Apple for Alleged Tax Fraud

U.S. tech giant Apple is under investigation in Italy for allegedly hiding 1 billion euros (\$1.34 billion) from the local tax authority, two judicial sources with direct knowledge of the matter told Reuters.

Milan prosecutors say Apple failed to declare to Italian tax authorities 206 million euros in 2010 and 853 million euros in 2011, one of the sources said, confirming a report by Italian magazine L'Espresso.

"Checks on the size of the tax are under way," the source said.

The Italian subsidiary of Apple booked some of its profit through Irish-based subsidiary Apple Sales International (ASI), thus lowering its taxable income in Italy, the source said.

"Apple pays every dollar and euro it owes in taxes and we are continuously audited by governments around the world," the company said in a statement. "The Italian tax authorities already audited Apple Italy in 2007, 2008 and 2009 and confirmed that we were in full compliance with the OECD documentation and transparency requirements. We are confident the current review will reach the same conclusion."

The maker of the iPhone is the latest prominent corporation to become the target of a tax inquiry in Italy amid a global crackdown aimed at preventing companies such as Google, Amazon and others from avoiding taxes.

In crisis-hit Italy, tax authorities faced with dwindling revenues have become more aggressive with domestic and multinational companies.

In June, fashion designers Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana were handed a 20-month suspended prison sentence and a heavy fine for hiding hundreds of millions of euros in unpaid taxes. Both deny any wrongdoing.

"There is a global process under way and the Italian tax authority is one of the most active," said an Italian tax source. "In general, the focus is shifting towards multi-nationals that are able to lower their tax base through their international operations."

To try to fix public finances, Italy's largest ruling party, the center-left PD, has proposed legislation to oblige companies that advertise and sell online in Italy to do so only through agencies with a tax presence in Italy.

The proposal, dubbed the Google Tax, is meant to combat a tendency by corporations to shift revenue out of Italy and into low-tax countries such as Luxembourg or Ireland.

A U.S. Senate investigation in May revealed that Apple structured its operations so that the vast majority of its non-U.S. profits are reported in Ireland, by companies which, through an unusual feature of Irish tax law, are not tax resident in that country.

ASI contracts with mainly Chinese companies to manufacture iPads and iPhones. ASI then sells these products to another Irish company which resells them to retail subsidiaries in Italy and other European countries.

The pricing of the inter-company transactions ensures that the lion's share of the profit ends up with ASI, the Senate report said. Low profits in countries like Italy mean low tax payments there.

Countries usually consider companies registered on their territory to be tax resident there but Irish law allows ASI to be tax resident nowhere. This means its profits go untaxed.

UK Warns of Ransom Scam Targeting Tens of Millions

The British government has issued an unusually stark warning about a cyberscam that locks users out of their computers unless they pay a ransom, saying that tens of millions of people may soon be targeted.

In a message headlined "URGENT ALERT," Britain's National Crime Agency said Friday they were aware of a "mass email spamming event that is ongoing" and urged computer users to beware messages purporting to come from their bank.

The scam works by tricking users into downloading CryptoLocker, a piece of malicious software that encrypts a user's hard drive, effectively scrambling all their personal documents and photos.

A countdown clock appears on the screen warning that the files will be lost irrevocably unless a ransom is paid, typically through hard-to-trace cybercurrencies such as Bitcoin.

Snapchat Rejected \$3 Billion Buyout Offer from Facebook

Mobile messaging startup Snapchat rejected an acquisition offer from Facebook Inc that would have valued the company at \$3 billion or more, according to a Wall Street Journal report on Wednesday.

Facebook representatives reached out to Snapchat in recent weeks to discuss the all-cash deal, which would have been Facebook's largest acquisition ever, the report said, citing anonymous sources.

Facebook declined to comment. Snapchat could not immediately be reached for comment.

Snapchat, which allows consumers to send smartphone photos which automatically disappear after a few seconds, has proven popular among teenage users.

The report of Facebook's interest in Snapchat comes a couple of weeks after Facebook, the world's No. 1 Internet social network, acknowledged that it was seeing a decline in daily use by young teenagers in the U.S., although it said overall use by teenagers was stable.

Mysterious Software Claims It Can Cleanse Google of Lies About How Much You Suck

Are you sick of potential dates being turned off by your ex-girlfriend's online claims that you were a coke-addicted, abusive mess when you dated? Then you will love a new website called Brand.com, which cleanses Google of false information about people, places and things.

Brand.com's president, Michael Zammuto, told VentureBeat the site's "patent-pending De-Indexing Action Plan is the first turnkey process that can permanently erase misleading content from Google, Yahoo, and Bing's search algorithms."

"No one else in the online reputation management industry offers this conveyor-belt style de-indexing service," he added.

But Brand.com won't spill the beans on how its proprietary patent-pending process works. They claim the algorithm not only keeps lies and libel from showing up in Google searches, but also is able to verify whether or not the information is false so, sorry, you can't just use it to stamp out all the bad online reviews of your business.

We're not really sure how an algorithm could determine whether or not you were a shitty boyfriend three years ago. But hey, kudos to Brand.com for trying.

Whether the mysterious algorithm works or not, we doubt people will stop posting unfavorable reviews online any time soon. If it does work, expect a proliferation of apps like Lulu that can tell you about a boyfriend's sexual prowess Google-free.

Apple's iPad Mini with Retina Display Available

They might not be wearing Christmas sweaters, but Apple's iPad family is ready for the holiday season.

Apple announced that its new iPad Mini with a Retina Display will be available starting today at Apple's online store. The tablet, which was announced last month, still has a smaller 7.9-inch display than the full-size iPad, but now that display has significantly better resolution.

The 2048 x 1536 resolution screen is much crisper, making photos, videos and text appear sharper. The tablet starts now at \$399, rather than the \$329 the original Mini cost. However, Apple is still keeping that original, lower-resolution Mini on shelves for \$299.

Of course, the two smaller tablet siblings are also joined by the iPad Air, which has a larger 9.7-inch display and a higher \$499 starting price. The Air and the new iPad Mini with Retina really only differ in

size. They both have Apple's new A7 processor, a similar design and Retina Displays. Apple will also still offer the iPad 2 for \$399.

Though the new iPad mini goes on sale today, brick and mortar Apple stores won't sell it to walk-in customers directly. Instead, customers will need to place an order online and request in-store pickup, instead of just buying one on the spot at an Apple store. However, the new iPads will also be sold through AT&T, Sprint, T-Mobile, Verizon Wireless and select Apple Authorized Resellers.

That's four iPads available from Apple this holiday season to fight on the competitive tablet battlefield. Microsoft's Surface 2, Amazon's Kindle Fire HDX and Google's Nexus 7 are all being marketed by the respective companies as better alternatives to the iPad. However, while Apple's iPad sales slowed last quarter with 14.1 million sold versus the 14.6 million in the previous quarter, Apple CEO Tim Cook has said that he expects this to be an "iPad Christmas."

"We continue to view the tablet market as 'huge.' We see it as a large opportunity for us. We are not solely focused on unit share, as we've said many times, but on usage and customer satisfaction and other things that are very important to us," Cook said last month on the company's earnings call.

And analysts and reviewers tend to believe the same, that Apple continues to have the lead in the competitive market. While the other companies have come up with clever new hardware and software features, Apple's new thinner and lighter tablets and the availability of over 475,000 apps continues to put the tablet pioneer in the lead, even if the prices are higher.

"At \$399, the new iPad Mini is certainly one of the more expensive 8-inch tablets on the market and a few multiples of the price beyond the least expensive Android tablets," Ross Rubin, principal analyst for Reticle Research, told ABC News. "However, it includes premium components including the high-resolution display and high-end A7 processor."

This Thanksgiving, Order on Black Friday, Get It on Black Sabbath

It s hard to imagine living in America and not being a member of Amazon Prime. If you can do it, hat s off to you. You ve resisted a lot of pressure. Because even if you shop online only for Thanksgiving napkins, Hanes T-shirts or the occasional Wii U, you can t avoid Amazon, which tops Google s unpaid search results for just about every retail object.

And if you lazily follow those links to Amazon, you have to move heaven and earth to resist joining Amazon Prime, for which traps are set at every turn. Agree to hand over \$79 annually and you get white-glove right-this-way-sir service and, above all, free two-day shipping. It seems irresistible; the graphic design alone makes it hard to say no.

And two-day shipping doesn t mean just two business days. It means Saturdays and Sundays, too. Amazon Prime members no longer just ride first class on the Internet. The fix is in for Amazonians with the U.S. Postal Service, that is the government.

American free speech and the interstate circulation of information has

long been thought to require a federal postal system. The Constitution mandates that Congress establish post offices and post roads. Thomas Jefferson, who thought mail was the states problem, worried that a centralized postal system would invite patronage and mismanagement.

Sure, he didn't name Amazon. But what is patronage if not the juggernaut Amazon's partnership with the flailing U.S. Postal Service? Amazon's stuff, and Amazon's alone, now gets delivered by our government through rain, heat and gloom of Saturday night.

Sunday delivery of Amazon goods by the postal service started this week in Los Angeles and New York, and Jeff Bezos' company in concert with the United States Postal Service plans to expand it to Dallas, Houston, New Orleans, Phoenix and more cities next year.

You don't have to pay extra for your Sunday packages (Amazon paid off the feds so you don't have to). If you have Prime and live in New York or L.A., you can buy something on Friday and have it by Sunday for free. Non-Prime shoppers, who get free 5-to-8-day shipping on orders that cost \$35 and up, will find that Sunday is now counted among the days.

The postal service, which has not delivered on Sunday since 1912 and has been aiming to drop Saturday, shores up its rocky balance book with this patronage sorry, partnership deal. But can it shore up its reliability?

Amazon should have to indicate in the description of an item if they're going to deliver using USPS," a consumer retail analyst, who declined to be identified, told me. The analyst echoed the impression of many consumers that the postal service is currently as Jefferson warned mismanaged.

Amazon, for its part, is trumpeting the partnership as part of its world retail domination. The three big pieces of growth for us are selection, lower prices and speed," Dave Clark, Amazon's vice president of worldwide operations and customer service, said in a public statement. "Adding an additional day is all about delivery speed. An Amazon customer can order a backpack and a Kindle for their child and be packing it up on Sunday for school on Monday."

Hmm. Or I can order more books about dogs that I don't need and have them before I need them, which is never. This idea that you desperately need pronto Amazon deliveries like Kindles and backpacks for the children! is questionable. But ever since Amazon Prime appeared, I know I have been ordering more stuff: Because it's easy and there are no shipping costs.

More stuff, more cheaply and more quickly: If that's Amazon's wish, mine is for less stuff, less disorganized and less useless.

Can Amazon partner with, say, a government environmental group to facilitate that?

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